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Low-Keyed Rep. Hamilton Expected to Head Intelligence Panel

Quiet Official on Way to Key Post

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JEFFERSONVILLE, Ind.—Barring an election upset, one of the most powerful men in the new Congress will be one whom hardly anyone has ever heard of: Rep. Lee H. Hamilton, a low-keyed Democrat from southeast Indiana who will become chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Hamilton's low profile is no accident. For example, he waited until this year, his 20th in Washington, to call his first formal news conference, on economic policy, and he regularly turns down invitations to television network news programs.

Nevertheless, despite being a Democrat from a Republican state, Hamilton remains enormously popular in his district, where he has a reputation as an effective moderate. In fact, a local Republican politician in his district regularly runs on his coattails, reminding voters that "Lee Hamilton and I were elected the same year."

In Congress, Hamilton has played the moderator between liberals and conservatives not only on the Intelligence Committee but also as the second-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Human Rights Cited

On Central America, he helped fashion the compromise that preserved U.S. aid to El Salvador contingent upon improvements in human rights, but at the same time he helped lead the Democratic fight to stop covert aid to the rightist Nicaraguan rebels, or *contras*, until at least February.

Hamilton, who will become only the second chairman of the Intelligence Committee since its creation six years ago, has prepared an ambitious agenda. It includes reviews of presidentially ordered covert activities around the world, which have ranged from supporting the *contras* in Nicaragua to financing moderate politicians in Africa.



Rep. Lee H. Hamilton

"All covert actions need to be reviewed and rationalized (justified)," he said in an interview here. About a dozen covert actions are now being conducted, intelligence sources say.

The Democratic-controlled House committee, which has seemed more determined to play its watchdog role recently than has its Republican-led Senate counterpart, will also "look into the quality and cost-effectiveness of the intelligence product," Hamilton said. The nation's intelligence budget reportedly totals \$10 billion a year.

Hamilton listed several controversial issues that he wants to probe, including:

—"How the *contras* are funded now." There have been unconfirmed reports that, to circumvent the congressional ban on U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, sympathetic armed forces of other Central American nations are funneling some of their U.S.-provided material to the *contras*.

—"Whether CIA funds are used to circumvent" the government's foreign military sales program, which is run by the Defense Department. Two helicopters have been provided to El Salvador in this way, he said, and "I want to know how extensive this is, and why we do it that way at all."

—"How extensively U.S. military forces operate clandestinely abroad." U.S. special forces units took part in the invasion of Grenada last year, and elite groups trained in hostage rescue techniques have reportedly been sent overseas in other situations.

Back home, Hamilton feels little pressure from his district to probe alleged CIA excesses. There are hardly any liberals, except among Indiana University students in Bloomington.

"A political science professor followed me around for a week during a campaign," Hamilton mused recently during a swing across his sprawling district. "He said he hadn't heard a single liberal question from anyone in my audiences."

"We're either conservatives or moderates out here," he said with a smile, looking almost boyish in a graying crew cut that he has worn since he was an Evansville high school basketball star in 1948.

Hamilton grew up in a deeply religious home—his father and brother are Methodist ministers—and a staunchly Republican one. But he was turned off by the communist witch-hunting tactics of Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, the Wisconsin Republican and, as a lawyer from Columbus, Ind., entered Democratic politics supporting John F. Kennedy for President in 1960.

Margins Above 60%

He was elected to the House in his first attempt, during the 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson landslide for the Democrats. His winning election margins since then have been consistently above 60%.

Despite Hamilton's interest in foreign policy, his constituents are more directly affected by farm subsidies and river dredgings. He owes his popularity in the district less to his national reputation than to his greater-than-usual attention to voters here. On average, he spends about one weekend out of two in the district.

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He steadily built a reputation in Congress as a fair-minded, pragmatic, non-ideological, bland-to-dull Hoosier who worked hard and sought to be effective rather than visible.

This year's Almanac of American Politics calls Hamilton one of the few members of Congress "who is genuinely respected on all sides. . . . He is one of those relatively rare members who can sway a vote in committee or on the floor just because members of both parties respect his judgment and fairness."

This year he faces the same Republican challenger whom he beat 2 to 1 in 1982, Floyd Coates, a 40-year-old plastics manufacturer who calls Hamilton "a big spender on everything but defense . . . an Eastern-type liberal."

But even Hamilton's Republican victims later have good words for him. State Sen. Robert Garton, beaten for the House seat in 1968, said Hamilton has "native ability, intelligence, an analytical mind, and he's personable. It's a winning combination."